Confronting capitalism

An interview with Vivek Chibber

D. L. Jacobs

On September 19, 2022, Platypus Affiliated Society member D. L. Jacobs interviewed Vivek Chibber, editor of Catalyst: A Journal of Theory and Strategy*, on his new book* Confronting Capitalism: How the World Works and How to Change It *(2022).*[1]

D. L. Jacobs: In your book *Confronting Capitalism*, you mention in the introduction that this text is for the incipient Left. With respect to a recent *Jacobin* issue "The Left in Purgatory,"[2] how do you understand the moment for the Left, especially with regard to the 2010s and going forward?

Vivek Chibber: It's a moment when the Left is coming out of its utter marginalization, and it is getting some mainstream legitimacy and traction, due in some measure to social movements that have gotten off the ground in the last ten years or so. But it is primarily due to the Bernie Sanders candidacy which made socialism and democratic socialism something part of the mainstream political discourse and gave it a kind of respectability. The Left is still marginal in American culture. While the discourse and the language of socialism is no longer taboo, there is little actual organizing on the ground by socialists, even though they're establishing a beachhead within the working class. Socialists are still overwhelmingly isolated from the working class. It's an initial step towards the revitalization of socialist politics, and there's no guarantee that it will move forward.

DLJ: In your introduction, you mention the tradition of giving introductions to capitalism. You said there used to be pamphlets like this in the 1970s. One of my favorites is Karl Kautsky's *The Class Struggle* (1892). How do you find yourself contributing to that tradition of the introduction to capitalism, and what do you find missing in introductions to capitalism? There have been a few in the last decade.

VC: I would need to know which ones you have in mind to compare mine to, but, in general, this was a tradition that socialist parties and labor parties took seriously when they had a mass base, for obvious reasons. They were trying to build not just a class consciousness, but also a class analysis among the more educated sections of their mass base. When they no longer have a mass base because they are now in professional organizations, academia, or NGOs — this is starting in the 60s — their attention is no longer fixed on educating the people they are organizing. It's fixed more on pleasing their donors and employers. The whole tradition of popularizing socialism withers starting in the 1980s, and it gets worse as time goes on. My contribution to the tradition is based on my realization that the new generation of socialists coming up only has available to them these introductions from the 30s and the 60s. When I read the pamphlets from the 60s, I was disappointed by them because while they did try to popularize a certain politics: they were sectarian, and they wrote in a language that nobody speaks outside of sectarian groups. They were written as if they were trying to please an imaginary party official rather than making themselves understood. So the idea was to contribute to the tradition with an introduction that is more in line with the language and the tone used in journalism today.

DLJ: In your book *The Class Matrix* and in the articles you have written for *Compact* and *Catalyst*, you talk about rescuing class from the cultural turn. You make the case that the cultural turn may have had a good intention, but it made class opaque to some degree. I bring that up because thinkers such as C. Wright Mills said, don't write off the working class; but we have to study that issue anew.[3] How do you see the cultural turn as having either missed the point, or made class opaque?

VC: The cultural turn had several phases.

One phase was where they were trying to understand the role that culture plays either in the organization or the domestication of the working class. This phase's practitioners had no doubt about the existence of class. The class does have certain objective interests, and it is in a relation of exploitation with respect to capital. There's an objective reality out there, and in that reality there are two classes. The classes have antagonistic interests, but the perception and the motivational force of those interests are taken to be mediated by culture. Now that is a legit, fruitful, and productive line of inquiry. All radicals not only should pursue it, but in all organizing you're doing it all the time. Organizing is a practical melding of culture to underlying interests.

In its second, more ambitious phase, the cultural turn didn't seek to understand how culture mediates class structure, but came to the conclusion that culture constructs the class structure. And if it constructs the class structure, it also constructs objective interests, the antagonism between labor and capital. These are now seen as an artifact of culture and discourse. Once you take this step, you've essentially dissolved capitalism into language and discourse. This more aggressive version of the cultural turn took hold by the 1990s. If there's going to be a revitalization of the labor movement or the socialist movement, you need a response to this kind of argument. You can't dismiss it because it's a powerful argument. You have to show its flaws so that you can recover the underlying objective structure of capitalism while respecting the role that culture plays, even though it's more limited.

DLJ: Class is distinguished as a structure: people must socialize under objective constraints. Culture mediates class in that sense. But this also raises the question of stability: people are dependent, but when capitalism is in crisis they try to put it back together out of self-preservation. In those periods of crisis ideology plays a part. And so there is perhaps a way in which culture also is part of the constitution of whatever the concrete version of class is in that epoch of capitalism.

VC: Saying that it's in the constitution of that structure is too strong. The constitution of the structure is maintained by the imperatives and constraints that people face. Ideology either enables them to live with the choices that they have been compelled to make by virtue of the structure, or it helps them gather up the resolve by which they'll be willing to undertake the sacrifices and hard work that will be required to either transform that structure or to dismantle it all together. It might seem as if ideologies are a constitutive element of a structure, because you see it all the time: there's no phase of our life where we are ideology free; it can appear empirically that ideology drives us. But that's what distinguishes journalism from analysis.

DLJ: To pursue this thought in terms of the constitution versus the structural character, I think of Marx's preface to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) — the classical orthodox way in which Marxists used to describe this was base and superstructure — about trying to explain consciousness as the contradiction of the relations and forces. It would still seem to be that there's a causal side, but there could be a contradictory causal side.

VC: The word contradiction is one of the most mysterious words in the Marxist lexicon, and it's usually used when you can't figure something out. Ideology has to have a causal role, because as Marx says, it is in some way contributing to the reproduction of capitalism. The question is over what the force and place of that causal role is. On this Marx is unequivocal: ideology is a reflex. He uses words that denote a dependency. It's a reflex, a reflection, a camera obscura, etc. He never takes ideology to be one of the constituent elements of the structure. If he did that, he and Engels would never have written *The German Ideology* (1846), the whole point of which was to restore a materialism to the socialist movement. There is confusion that 20th century Marxists have instilled into theory. But everybody from Marx to the classical Marxists was clear that workers are in an objective relation of dependence, they have objective interests with respect to capital, and those interests are objectively antagonistic. That might be wrong, but if it's wrong, Marxism is wrong.

DLJ: This leads into the discussion about the state in politics. You have a section in Chapter 2, entitled, "Real Power Is in the Economy." The section is a discussion on the state, and if the state is neutral. You take up the standard pluralist argument, and show why it is faulty. This section also raises the question of what makes the state. Would you say it's capitalist? Or would you say it's capitalist biased?

VC: It's a hard question. To say that the state is capitalist means that there's a specificity to its institutions which makes them identifiably and specifically capitalist, independently of the role that they play in the reproduction of capitalism. If that's the case, they should be institutions that are incompatible with any other economic system. There must be institutionally specific state forms which are, by virtue of their internal logic, incompatible with say a socialist or a feudal state. It's hard to think of many beyond a select few. The institutions of a bourgeois state are malleable enough to fit in many other economic systems. There is a specifically capitalist set of state institutions, but they're limited. Protection of absolute property rights would be one. But if we go with Lenin and add the state, its bureaucracy, its reproductive rules are so specific to capitalism and incompatible with socialism that that state must be smashed — that's hard to sustain. It's a state in capitalism rather than a specifically capitalist state, but it has specifically capitalist features and would have to be dismantled in a post-capitalist system.

Issue 152 | December 2022 – January 2023

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Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes Leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of Leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

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About the Platypus Affiliated Society

The Platypus Affiliated Society, established in December 2006, organizes reading groups, public fora, research and journalism focused on problems and tasks inherited from the "Old" (1920s–30s), "New" (1960s–70s) and post-political (1980s–90s) Left for the possibilities of emancipatory politics today.

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152

The **Platypus Review**

Issue 152 | December 2022 – January 2023

1 Confronting capitalism
An interview with Vivek Chibber
D. L. Jacobs

3 We were orphans
An interview with Enzo Traverso
Noah Spore

www:

Popular Front radicalism
A review of Adolph Reed, Jr.'s *The South*
John Garvey

Shadowboxing?
A review of Vivek Chibber's *The Class Matrix*
Russell Jacoby

The quintessence of Marxism
A popular presentation
Karl Korsch

We were orphans

An interview with Enzo Traverso

Noah Spore

On May 18, 2022, Platypus Affiliated Society member Noah Spore interviewed Enzo Traverso, author of Fire and Blood: The European Civil War 1914–1945 *(2007),* Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory *(2017), and* Revolution: An Intellectual History *(2021). An edited transcript follows.*

Noah Spore: Let's start at the beginning. Tell me about joining the Left.

Enzo Traverso: I was born in Italy in 1957, and so joining the Left as an adolescent wasn't uncommon at all; it was usual for someone belonging to my generation, not only in Italy but also in many other countries during the 70s.

I come from one Left-wing oriented family, my father being a Communist mayor in a small city. I immediately joined the radical Left, so I was to the Left of the Communist Party. The Italian Communist Party (PCI) wasn't as sectarian as the French Communist Party or even the Communist Party USA at that time, so this didn't create unbearable tension in my family.

NS: This was in the 70s, so we're looking at the Historic Compromise, on the one hand, and the Red Brigades on the other.

ET: If I can mention something autobiographical, I discovered politics and became an activist just after the Chilean coup in September 1973, which had a strong impact on a global scale, particularly on the Left because of the enormous expectations and hopes embodied by Unidad Popular in Chile. The strategy the PCI drew from this event was the Historic Compromise, a strategy of conquering power and starting a transition to socialism through an alliance not only with Socialists on the Left, which was a minority current with respect to Communism in Italy, but also with Catholics, i.e., a traditionally conservative party. This was Enrico Berlinguer's reinterpretation of Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, of a Western path to socialism, of the war of position, and a social-democratic or reformist reinterpretation of what Gramsci called the historical bloc. The radical Left had a totally different interpretation of Pinochet's coup, and the first political campaign in which I participated was called Armi al MIR ("Arms for the MIR"),[1] the revolutionary Left-wing organization that supported Unidad Popular. In other words, the discrepancy was clear at that moment: the PCI was oriented towards a coalition with Christian Democracy, while the far Left looked for a radical break with the state and the army. For us, the historical meaning of the coup was that socialism could not be achieved without a radical break with the state and the army, which is its core. So, if you like, this was an old debate between reform and revolution that was suddenly put forward on the agenda by a tragic event.

But this lesson of Pinochet's coup was also related to a different appraisal of the international situation. We thought that we were living a time of revolution, that we had to be prepared for a clash with power, and many events on a global scale legitimated this view: less than two years after Pinochet's coup, the Vietnamese revolutionaries took power, Francoism fell in Spain in the middle of great social turmoil, in Portugal an authentic revolution overthrew Salazarism, etc. We thought that we had to be prepared for a radical clash, and this clash inevitably meant a military confrontation with power. Therefore, this discussion about the "force," as it was called at that time, was a true debate; it was the time of guerilla warfare in Latin America — not in Chile but in Argentina and many other countries. It was a time of great expectations, and I think that this state of mind lasted for the entire decade, in Italy certainly until 1980.

This was also the context of the rise of Left-wing terrorism. At the beginning, the Red Brigades were an armed fragment of the radical Left; then, particularly after kidnapping Aldo Moro, one of the leaders of Christian Democracy, they dominated the political stage by conducting a kind of private war against the state that paralyzed and weakened any other social and political movement. The outcome is known: the Red Brigades were dismantled by the police and the radical Left collapsed.

NS: I want to back up a little bit. You mentioned reform and revolution, these classic debates, so I was wondering if we could work out the historiography a bit, not only regarding reform and revolution but the entire related concept of the European Civil War.

ET: The idea of a European Civil War is old, but as a historiographical debate this concept appeared much later, in the 1990s. I wrote a book with this title in 2007.[2] Before that moment, this concept had hardly been discussed, and only in the field of political theory, where it had been introduced by Carl Schmitt. Because of Schmitt's political orientation and trajectory, this concept was sort of taboo, and couldn't be discussed. It entered the historiographical debate in the 1990s after Claudio Pavone's history of the Italian Resistance,[3] which he reinterpreted as a threefold war: a class war, a war of national liberation, and civil war between fascists and antifascists. After this book, which was a major achievement in the historiography of the Second World War, this notion came back, and could be discussed beyond its Schmittian matrix. It was in this context that I started using it.

Basically, the idea is that the decades going from the First to the Second World War were shaped in Europe by a deep political crisis, and, since the end of the 1920s, an economic crisis. The old European order had collapsed, and a new institutional order couldn't appear. The transition from a continent of dynastic empires to a viable architecture of nation-states had failed, and Europe fell into a permanent crisis shaped by deep social and political conflicts, notably the confrontation between Communism and Fascism. This was the alternative that appeared to replace the failed liberal order of the 19th century. In other words, the European Civil War was a crisis that resulted in an ideological clash, in a *Weltanschauungskrieg*, a conflict opposing revolution and counterrevolution, democracy and Fascism, capitalism and socialism, with their antipodal worldviews. Therefore, the most interesting thinkers of these three decades are either fascist thinkers like Martin Heidegger, Carl Schmitt, Ernst Jünger, or Giovanni Gentile, on the one hand, or Marxist thinkers, like V. I. Lenin, Leon Trotsky, Antonio Gramsci, Rosa Luxemburg, or this marginal current of critical theory, whose importance will appear much later. This is the historical meaning of the European Civil War. Some scholars extend this concept beyond the boundaries of Europe, and suggest we should speak of an International Civil War, because this confrontation between revolution and counterrevolution finally shaped the entire 20th century. Europe was the heart of international relations in 1914, but it lost this central position after 1945, when the conflict between Fascism and Communism was replaced by that between real socialism and capitalism, between the USSR and the so-called "free world."

NS: In the introduction to your book on the European Civil War, you connect this with your childhood. Do you see the European Civil war as something immanent to the crisis of politics in the 1970s?

ET: Yes, I do: our political, historical, theoretical, and even symbolic references had their matrix in the years between the two World Wars. For us, being revolutionaries meant building a Bolshevik party, following the Bolshevik model or one of its variants, such as those experienced in China, Vietnam, or Cuba. This was a military paradigm of revolution. For us, being anti-fascist didn't just mean establishing democratic institutions; it meant changing the socio-economic basis of Western Europe, i.e., accomplishing the revolutionary and socialist potentialities of resistance. This was our mental landscape, which sometimes became a caricature of Bolshevism.

NS: In the 70s and early 80s, what was the influence of Trotsky in Italy, as the PCI was moving away from the Moscow center? I ask because what you are talking about, that you fight anti-fascism through armed resistance in the name of socialism, sounds like Trotsky's writings from the 1930s.

ET: Trotskyism was extremely important in the emergence of what is usually called the New Left on a global scale. In France, Spain, the UK, and the U.S., Trotskyism was the hegemonic tendency on the radical Left since the 1930s. That is for some historical reasons. In Italy, Trotskyism had been active and significantly influential in the 1960s, when its advocates practiced entryism into the PCI and led its youth federations almost everywhere. They had created a weekly, *La Sinistra*, which was a mix of Trotskyism and Castroism, we could say.

Paradoxically, the tragedy of Italian Trotskyism was that it faced a very soft, already social-democratic Communist Party. In France, the Communist Party expelled the Trotskyists in the early 1960s, and in 1968 they participated in May 68 with their own organization. In Italy, in the 1960s, the PCI did not expel them, because it was a more tolerant organization, and what happened is that most young activists left the Communist Party, and created new organizations, which were mostly Maoist, because the Trotskyists were unable to break with the Communist Party. Because of two decades of fascism, Trotsky's ideas came relatively late in Italy.

This point should be explained by mentioning a second paradox. Italian fascism was relatively "pluralist" and tolerant compared to German National Socialism. Mussolini never organized something like an *auto-da-fé* of forbidden books. Under Mussolini, *History of the Russian Revolution* (1930), Trotsky's masterpiece, was translated and published, as well as Trotsky's autobiography. So Marxist literature wasn't completely forbidden; it was published because Trotsky was an internationally prominent political figure. But because of fascism, Italian Marxism was repressed and had a purely underground life. Gramsci wrote his notebooks in prison. Another important figure of Italian Marxism was Amadeo Bordiga, an extremely sectarian and dogmatic thinker, but he too was completely isolated. Therefore, Trotskyism in Italy never achieved an influence comparable to that in other countries like France or the U.S. The symbiosis of Trotskyism and Surrealism that took place in France in the 30s, or the influence Trotskyism had on the so-called New York intellectuals, never happened in Italy.

Italian Marxism was recreated after WWII under the hegemony of the PCI, and in this context some creative figures appeared, but were quite marginal, e.g., philosophers like Lucio Colletti or Galvano Della Volpe. An important current in Italian Marxism appeared in the early 1960s with *operaismo* (workerism), which was created by Mario Tronti, the young Antonio Negri, and Raniero Panzieri in particular, who created the journal *Quaderni Rossi*. This current had several links in France, Germany, and the U.S. *Operaismo* was really a theoretically creative and original current of thought. It emerged from the gigantic social change that was transforming Italy from a rural, poor, backward country into a highly modern, industrialized country. This tearing metamorphosis meant the birth of a completely new working class, which didn't correspond with the image of the proletariat defended either by the PCI (traditional skilled workers), or by Gramsci in his writings on the factory councils or even his *Prison Notebooks*. The tenants of *operaismo* were interested in analyzing the new forms of organization and political action of a young working class of unskilled, immigrant workers (coming from rural Southern Italy), who didn't recognize themselves in the old political parties. Trotskyism was unable to understand these social changes, defending an old, mostly political concept of the working class. Trotskyism was influential as a component of the Communist Party, but intellectually speaking it was less creative than *operaismo* and never produced anything comparable to the *New Left Review*. The history of Italian Trotskyism is the history of many missed encounters.

If your question is why I joined Trotskyism at that time, the reason is simple: differently from *operaismo* or Maoism, Trotskyism was the political current in the New Left that expressed the most accomplished historical consciousness. It was Trotskyism that embodied the memory not only of the Russian Revolution, but also of the struggle against fascism and Stalinism. This was one of its distinguishing features, with other currents being much more attracted by the novelty of the Cuban Revolution, guerilla warfare in Latin America, or the Cultural Revolution in China, and never seriously scrutinizing the nature of fascism or Stalinism. Reading Trotsky or Ernest Mandel, I found this missing historical dimension. Isaac Deutscher's works also played a crucial role in my decision to become a Trotskyist.

NS: This is a good transition to the question of the 20th century. In an important document for Platypus, the panel discussion, "The Decline of the Left in the 20th Century," Richard Rubin raised the possibility of Walter Benjamin and Trotsky being the "hidden," "esoteric" history of the 20th century as opposed to the "real" history made of Franklin D. Roosevelt and Hitler.[4] In Platypus, we contend, in Hegelian terms, that "the history of the Left is the history of the present in its 'actuality,'" that it is only from the standpoint of the Left that the "key" to what appears to be a Benjaminian "empty time" might be "filled." I was not surprised, given the focus of your work, to see these same two figures appear prominently. How might the history of the 20th century appear primarily as the defeat, the collapse, even the *regression* of the Left?

ET: Approaching this complex matter with Benjamin's lens, we shouldn't view the process in cumulative or linear terms: progress or regression. The history of the 20th century is the history of a permanent clash between revolution and counterrevolution. If we consider, following Eric Hobsbawm, the "short" 20th century as a time span going from WWI to the end of the 1980s, this permanent confrontation between revolution and counterrevolution is made of sudden jumps forward, and equally unpredictable throwbacks. The Russian Revolution was unexpected at the end of the Great War, and it radically changed the force relations between the Left and the Right on a global scale, but was followed by fascism in Italy, by National Socialism in Germany, by Francoism in Spain after the end of the Civil War. When Benjamin wrote his "On the Concept of History" in 1940, things seemed absolutely desperate, but a few years later we had not only the fall of fascism and National Socialism, but a structural transformation in Central Europe, a revolution in China, etc. The history of the 20th century is made of such discontinuities and leaps, without fixing a clear linear movement.

What happened at the end of the 1980s is the sudden consciousness of a political defeat as the conclusion of this entire cycle. 1989 is the moment when the Left understood that an entire sequence of revolutionary upheavals was exhausted, that this historical experience had finished. That's the point. The strategic models that had been created in 1917 in Russia, and in different ways had been adapted in non-European countries, from Asia to Latin America, had finally been defeated, and were no longer useful. We realized that the age of wars and revolutions was over. This titanic confrontation between capitalism and socialism, between revolution and counterrevolution, had been won by capitalism, i.e., by counterrevolution. This wasn't so easy to accept, to "metabolize." I belong to the last generation that lived both the hopes and the fall of this revolutionary age. We had to change our projects, categories of thinking, and interpretive tools, and we had to rethink the potential subjects of political change. Rethinking revolution in the 21st century means rethinking the social subjects of this revolutionary process. Changing the world now means different strategies, different actors. E.g., how do we rethink the concept of the proletariat, in a historical context in which the social and economic weight of the industrial working class is no longer the same, as in the age of Fordism? This was a huge task, and I am not sure that my generation was able to satisfactorily answer this challenge. The end of the 80s is a historical turn, in which all must be rethought. I found in Daniel Bensaid's works the best expression of this self-consciousness.

NS: The thing that comes to mind when you say that is the contrary view, that whatever collapsed in 1989 wasn't the Left, or was a Left already in deep decay. This isn't a Trotskyist view of course, but Theodor Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* (1966) comes to mind:

> The liquidation of [Marxist] theory by dogmatization and thought taboos contributed to the bad practice; the recovery of theory's independence lies in the interest of practice itself . . . Today, with theory paralyzed and disparaged by the all-governing bustle, its mere existence, however impotent, bears witness against the bustle. This is why theory is legitimate and why it is hated; without it, there would be no changing the practice that constantly calls for change. Those who chide theory anachronistic obey the *topos* of dismissing, as obsolete, what remains painful as thwarted. They thus endorse the world's course—defying which is the idea of theory alone—and the target is theoretically missed even if they succeeded in abolishing it, positivistically or by fiat.[5]

What is the palpable difference with regard to 1989 and all past failures for the Left? What might this have to do with Adorno's related view, that the Left itself had become incapable of practice and must return to theory in a changed form?

ET: There is a qualitative difference between 1989 and many previous defeats. Before 89, we faced defeated battles in a confrontation which was still open. After the throwback of the Spartacist uprising in 1919 in Germany, the Communist Party started thinking of how to be prepared for a new revolutionary break, with a more well-equipped party. This was the debate about the "Bolshevization" of Western Communist Parties between 1921 and 1924. At the "midnight in the century," after the German-Soviet treaty of 1939, the Left was shaken but did not collapse, and even the Chilean coup of 1973 pushed the Left to organize an armed resistance.

1989 is completely different. At the beginning we were euphoric: "the Berlin Wall is falling down, and this means a German Revolution is coming." This was the view of Ernest Mandel, for instance: after many decades of passivity and exclusion, the German proletariat would suddenly return in the heart of Europe to accomplish a socialist revolution, which would be the convergence between an anti-capitalist revolution in the West and an anti-bureaucratic, anti-Stalinist revolution in Eastern Europe. Germany was considered the place where these revolutions could merge. Everybody was extremely enthusiastic. Trotskyists, who had always been anti-Stalinist, couldn't help but support this movement.

However, very quickly, in one year, we understood that the collapse of actually existing socialism meant the end of the Cold War and the victory of capitalism on a world scale. All our categories suddenly became obsolete. After 1989 the notion of Trotskyism itself had become obsolete. Trotskyism after 1989 is a realm of memory. Of course, this doesn't mean that Trotsky should be forgotten, or that his writings shouldn't be read or would be useless, but Trotskyism's *raison d'être* was anti-Stalinism, and after the end of Stalinism, it's impossible to build a Left around the assumptions of Trotskyism. Trotskyism could survive only by transcending itself into something new. Today, Trotskyism means that a Left for the 21st century cannot forget the lessons of the struggles against Stalinism, authoritarianism, and totalitarianism, and it cannot forget the idea of socialist democracy. But today, speaking of a Trotskyist Left doesn't mean very much. At least, for people of your generation.

That's the first part of my answer. The second part is what to do with Adorno's legacy. From this point of view, Adorno doesn't offer us any useful idea of rebuilding the Left. If we adopted the political conclusions of Adorno's thought, we would have abandoned our struggle much earlier than 1989. Adorno was a powerful thinker, no doubt. He wrote masterpieces like *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) with Horkheimer or *Negative Dialectics*, and he was able to understand this peculiar feature of 20th century capitalism, this new negative dialectic producing totalitarianism, producing an authoritarian rule: the clash between productive forces and property relations is not necessarily sublated by superior social relations, by socialism, but this clash can result in fascism or totalitarian forms of power. Adorno perfectly understood this tendency, but his political conclusion was that totalitarianism was a sort of ineluctable outcome of modernity. When you read *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Negative Dialectics*, what remains is criticism — our capacity for looking at civilization, history, with a critical gaze — without any emancipatory hope. The world cannot be changed. Emancipation is an illusion. The world is doomed to domination. The entire trajectory of civilization from antiquity to Auschwitz is a coherent logic of domination. But ultimately domination has no alternative: we can adopt a critical, but purely contemplative and politically impotent, gaze. This is a kind of negative Hegelianism, in which the *Weltgeist* (World Spirit) is replaced by totalitarianism. This is the reason for which someone like Herbert Marcuse eventually broke with the Frankfurt School, and why a true dialogue between Trotskyism and critical theory never could be established. Finally, Adorno's thought is the reason why, as I suggest in my book *Left-Wing Melancholia*, critical theory was blind to decolonization, to this wave of emancipatory struggles whose subjects were non-white and non-Western.[6] We can use Adorno fruitfully, but we cannot rebuild the Left with Adornian premises.

NS: He's not a positive thinker.

ET: He's not a revolutionary thinker. He's a melancholic thinker — he depicted his thought as a *traurige Wissenschaft* (melancholy science) — but he represents a resigned and purely contemplative melancholic Left. When in 1968, his students rediscovered the most radical texts of the Frankfurt School and decided to transform critical theory into a program of struggle, Adorno's answer was calling the police to evacuate the Institute for Social Research that they had occupied. Habermas, his disciple, depicted the student movement as a new form of fascism. At that moment, Marcuse broke with Adorno, writing him a letter in which he explained why he supported the German students. So, critical theory offers us many useful critical tools, but not a project for an effective 21st century Left.

NS: Let's talk about Benjamin, then, because that seems like that's where we're going. What about *Jetztzeit* (now time)? My first question is historical: is *Jetztzeit* a category of thought that still applies today as it might have when Benjamin wrote his "On the Concept of History"? In *Left-Wing Melancholia*, you refer to 1940 as the "Midnight of the Century." Is it possible to apply Benjamin's prosecution of history, this method of "nihilism" that he speaks of in the "Theologico-Political Fragment," in a way that goes beyond the purely negative dialectic of Adorno, or does it share that limitation?

ET: I don't share this enthusiasm that so many friends, colleagues, and students express, regarding Benjamin's "Theologico-Political Fragment," a text he wrote in 1921.[7] No doubt, this text is radical, but it was written when Benjamin had yet to discover Marxism, and before he had identified a social subject for social change. The revolutionary break evoked in this "theological-political" meditation is the eruption of God in history. It is an embryonic step in Benjamin's take on revolutionary messianism, which will find a clearer shape in his "On the Concept of History" as a symbiotic entanglement between Jewish theology and profane Marxism. This revolutionary political theology, which is indistinguishable from profane Marxism, results in political action, and the subject of revolutionary transformation is the proletariat. The proletariat — the vanquished of history — is the subject of a messianic redemption that corresponds with a profane political action in the present. The idea of class struggle, clearly defined in his "On the Concept of History" of 1940, does not exist in his fragment of 1921. Benjamin, we shouldn't forget, was completely indifferent to the Spartacist Revolution (1918–19). He discovered Marxism later, in the mid-1920s, not in the early 1920s.

That means *Jetztzeit* is not permanently available. *Jetztzeit* is exceptional; it is a clash between past and future, in which the past can suddenly reemerge and shape the present. This idea of a past that is unaccomplished, that is never definitely closed, that can be reactivated, is a fruitful idea. But this reactivation is not always possible; it requires some circumstances. We must be aware of this chance, and grasp it when this constellation appears. In 1940, there was no *Jetztzeit*; Benjamin was waiting for it. For a moment in 1989, we thought we were living a kind of *Jetztzeit*. But this didn't occur.

NS: Would you say 1989 was the central date for "the tragedy of your generation"?

ET: I would put quotation marks around this word: a "tragedy" in the sense that a generation suddenly realized that an entire historical sequence was over, engulfing its hopes and utopias. Reproducing our own paradigms of anti-Stalinism, anti-capitalism, anti-imperialism, such as they had been formulated and lived in a previous time, had become meaningless. A historical continuity was broken. The Left had to rethink its identity. This was the change.

NS: "Entire generations passing into discard," is what Trotsky wrote in 1933 with the triumph of Hitler.[8]

ET: 1933 was different; it was an enormous, tragic setback, but once again a lost battle. In 1933 no one could say "we lost; this is the final loss, and we can abandon the struggle." In 1933, the German Left — both Communist and Social Democratic — faced its gigantic and tragic mistakes: its incapacity to create a united front against fascism. The Left had to be rebuilt. One year later, the answer was the Popular Front. In 1933 Fascism won in Germany because the Left was divided. 1933 was a terrible defeat, but the struggle against fascism continued.

In 1989 we exited this historical turn with the feeling that capitalism had won, and that the struggle against capitalism must be rethought in conditions that were comparable to those existing at the origins of socialism, of the workers' movement. We came back to the age of industrial revolution; two centuries of struggles were erased. The workers' movement as it had been conceived of, had been structured, with its ideological references, with its transmitted culture, with its practices — all of that appeared as obsolete. After 1989, Communism disappeared, and Social Democracy became a pillar of the neoliberal order (Blairism has become the symbol of the destruction of the Left in the UK). In this sense, we were orphans.

Trotskyism too had been defeated, because 1989 was neither an anti-capitalist revolution in the West nor an anti-Stalinist revolution in the East. Trotskyism was affected by this historical defeat, as well as Stalinism. We had to rethink the Left, and three decades later, we are still facing the same challenge, despite revolutions, important movements that happened, new experiences, and important advances in criticism and critical theory. This problem of building a new Left capable of answering the challenges of the 21st century is still open. We don't have anything comparable to what socialism was in the 19th century, or what communism was in the 20th century.

NS: Do you feel like the potentials and defeats of 1989 are reposed every time we have a crisis in society, a crisis in the administered world?

ET: Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri could answer your question with a certain optimism, that finally, the potential premises for a liberated world, in terms of what they called the general intellect, the capacity of human beings to create a liberated society, are much greater today than a century ago. I agree with that. If we adopt this perspective, we could be optimistic that conditions for socialism are stronger today than a century ago, not to speak of Marx's time.

On the other hand, we should recognize — and this is not negligible in terms of building a political project for social change — that neoliberal capitalism was able to change the human condition itself. This victory of capitalism cannot be measured in terms of political repression. The victory of capitalism does not mean that capitalism consolidated its strongholds, conquered new markets, and expanded its influence. Capitalism has more deeply penetrated our forms of life, our mental world. This is the change. In the 20th century, the existence of the Soviet Union itself was proof, for ordinary people, that a different, non-capitalist world was possible. Today we live in a world in which capitalism doesn't have any alternative, and what is tragic is that we are increasingly aware that capitalist civilization is pushing our planet towards a catastrophic outcome. Neoliberalism transformed capitalism into a kind of "conduct of life" (*Lebensführung*), an anthropological model. I.e., we internalize individualism and competition.

We should be able to reintroduce utopia, the hope for a different world, and embody this utopia with a new political movement, which should be plural, open, not framed by powerful ideological boundaries. We should invent new forms of action that inscribe the memory of the Left into our new projects. This is not a simple task. There are interesting experiences, in many countries, something that could be compared to Charles Fourier's phalansteries, the 19th century communities in which people made new experiences and tried to organize different forms of life based on equality, non-commodified relations, etc. This is interesting, but not enough to challenge capitalism.

NS: Doesn't capitalism already do that? Before the interview, we were discussing Massimo Cacciari's book on Adolf Loos.[9] With someone like Loos, recreation of experience does happen in society, in the Metropolis, even if it points to utopia.

ET: You are speaking of the 1920s?

NS: Yes. So was that related to the political and social upheaval of the 1920s and 30s, and are those conditions that we can't perceive anymore, as a socio-political impetus that undergirded their thought?

ET: Yes. In the 1960s and 70s, similar experiences took place in several Italian cities ruled by the PCI. They explicitly adopted the model of Red Vienna (Rotes Wien), the new workers' neighborhoods created by Loos. But in both cases, these were experiences of social reformation supported by public powers that did not wish to overthrow capitalism. This regularly happens in history. Today in France, we have the ZAD (zones à defendre): "islands" in which young people organize their common life on different bases, by putting into question private property and commodified social relations. These experiences are interesting, but they don't participate in a broader movement to change the world. In the 1920s, the situation was different because it was possible to connect the avant-garde in different fields — aesthetics, art, architecture — to political struggles. Today it is more difficult.

NS: In *Left-Wing Melancholia*, you work through the concept of memory with relation to Marxism. On the one hand, there is Lenin in *The State and Revolution* (1917), for which you note, "the word 'memory' does not appear, but several chapters are devoted to the revolutionary 'experiences' of the nineteenth century, notably 1848 and the Paris Commune."[10] However, with regards to Trotsky in *Literature in Revolution* (1924) you write, "revolution was not a tabula rasa; it had its own vision of the past, as a kind of counter-memory opposed to the official interpretations of history. Revolution was the moment in which this vision 'raised from the deeps of memory' and pushed its actors to 'break a road into the future.'"[11] How might the Left, as a political object, mediate memory with the struggle for the future, to avoid what Adorno wrote, that "the leap into the future, clean over the conditions of the present, lands in the past"?[12]

ET: That's a beautiful sentence, although I'm not sure that Adorno gave useful advice to avoid this "landing in the past." To answer your question: memory is never literal. It is not something frozen, monolithic, immutable, and unchangeable. Memory is a process of selection, and memory is permanently changing our view of the past, because we put different questions to the past, and our gaze towards the past changes. This means that memory is the outcome of a process of selection of events, recollections, experiences, made in the past, which are useful, and become meaningful, according to our needs in the present and to our projects for the future. If we build a new utopia or, following Reinhart Koselleck, a new horizon of expectation for the 21st century, if the Left were able to build a new idea of futurity, it would engender a new memory of the past. The past is an enormous reservoir of experiences that can be remobilized and reactivated. Since 1989, history no longer appears as a sequence of revolutions: 1789, 1848, the Paris Commune, the Russian Revolution, the Chinese Revolution, etc. Hobsbawm periodized history this way because, there was one idea of the future, an idea of socialism, and this idea was normative.[13] Without this idea of futurity, it doesn't make sense to view the past as a sequence of revolutionary breaks. Building a memory of past revolutions, the workers' movement, or the Left is neither merely a historiographical task, nor a pure work of erudition. Creating archives, in which this experience could be preserved and protected, is not enough. We need to create a new idea of futurity that will orient our vision of the past. I am convinced that revolutions are the breath of history. **IP**

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[1] Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (Revolutionary Left Movement).

[2] *À feu et à sang. De la guerre civile européenne 1914–1945* (Paris: Editions Stock, 2007). In English: *Fire and Blood: The European Civil War 1914–1945*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2017).

[3] Claudio Pavone, *Una guerra civile. Saggio storico sulla moralità nella Resistenza* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1991). In English: *A Civil War: A History of the Italian Resistance*, ed. Stanislao Pugliese, trans. Peter Levy and David Broder (London: Verso, 2013).

[4] Richard Rubin, "1933," in "The Decline of the Left in the 20th Century," *Platypus Review* 17 (November 2009), available online at <https://platypus1917.org/2009/11/18/the-decline-of-the-left-in-the-20th-century-1933/>.

[5] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1997), 143.

[6] Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 166–77.

[7] Adorno attributed this text to late 1937 or early 1938 and claimed to have suggested its title, while Gershom Scholem attributed it to the early 1920s. See Walter Benjamin, "Theological-Political Fragment," in *Selected Writings: Volume 3: 1935–1938*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, et al., trans. Edmund Jephcott, et al. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2002), 305–06.

[8] Leon Trotsky, "To Build Communist Parties and an International Anew," available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1933/330715.htm>.

[9] Massimo Cacciari, *Architecture and Nihilism: On the Philosophy of Modern Architecture*, trans. Stephen Sartarelli (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

[10] Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia*, 58.

[11] Ibid, 71.

[12] Theodor Adorno, "Messages in a Bottle," *New Left Review* 1, no. 200 (July/Aug 1993).

[13] See Enzo Traverso, *Revolution: An Intellectual History* (London: Verso, 2021).

"Confronting capitalism," cont. from page 2

representatives come together from different sectors, which again requires a certain threshold of organization for it to be viable — not what California is doing, where there's no organization. What both of those have in common is this: they recognize that unions will never organize these sectors, like they organized auto, steel, etc. So, you're going to need legal extension of wage levels, job protections, etc. — not the union itself being the sole conduit for that to happen. That might be a reality we have to live with because of how de-industrializing capitalism been changed.

It might be that we need a strategic orientation wherein unions of key sectors of the economy provide resources for collective bargaining for their members to get their privileges and their rights, like the Ghent model. I highly doubt that we'll have a structural possibility of economy-wide union collective bargaining, because this is no longer the smokestack economy of the 1930s and 40s in the advanced capitalist world. We're going to need other measures that provide protection and power to workers, measures other than shop-level collective bargaining.

DLJ: Right. Part of the change in the economy is also informing the greater need for legislation —

VC: It starts there. If you have a class perspective on politics, you start with, what is the structure of capitalism today? What is its occupational makeup? What is its geographical map, its economic geography? What is the modal form and scope of employment? Where is most of the value produced, and what proportion of labor is in sectors that are vulnerable to organization? You have to start, but you can't assume that, just because it's capitalism, it's exactly as it was 100 years ago.

DLJ: Right. I just did an interview with Michael Hudson,[9] and the reason I bring that up is because part of what has been implicit in the organization of the American occupational structure has been the economies of other nations, such as China. The U.S. is still China's biggest exporter, and China has been the manufacturer of the world — but perhaps that's changing now. I.e., that also reflects how the class can be refracted across different nations in a different manner.

VC: *Confronting Capitalism* is about capitalism, which you're analyzing at the highest level of abstraction. When you come down to politics, you have to see how that fundamental structure is highly variable in its institutional forms and constitutive elements. The U.S. is capitalist, Germany is capitalist, Sweden is capitalist, Brazil is capitalist. But the actual topography of that structure, its actual makeup, its individual forms are variable though they operate within the constraints of capitalism. For politics to become viable, you have to get down from the most abstract analysis to the institutional specificities, because that's where you organize. You're going to have to see, are we a service-oriented capitalism or are we primarily manufacturing capitalism? If it's manufacturing capitalism, is it primarily in this and that industry or is it in a different sector? That's where real analysis takes off. The difficulty of the Left right now is we haven't even gotten to that stage, because most of the Left is asking, are interests real? Is ideology the most important thing? Does capitalism rest on culture? We're at the preschool level of social analysis rather than — forget about elementary or even high school level — we need to be at the graduate school level.

DLJ: There are still some ideological obstacles. So at least there's some value to what we're doing even — this is my point.

I did want to bring up one other thing. In your review of Erik Olin Wright's last book,[10] that article you wrote for *Jacobin*,[11] you discussed the gradual development versus the rupture break. There's really a relationship between gradual and rupture, right? That's the experience of the Second International: one couldn't choose to be gradual, but rather, the socialist movement posed a crisis in World War I, and this is what Lenin was taking up. I bring that up because I know earlier you said, yes, there are ultra-Left students on campus, who say, "we need a revolution tonight." Nonetheless, if we were to start getting the most basic mass movement going, it would still be as a function and part of capitalism: it would still be developing that contradiction. It is possible that that kind of question of the necessity of a dictatorship of the proletariat could be posed in the future.

VC: Yeah, certainly it's possible. It's just in the world that we inhabit today, for that possibility to even loom at some point in the hazy future, you have to do the hard work of gradual incremental, organizing first.

DLJ: Sure.

VC: The difficulty of that incremental organizing involves things like tactical alliances with political parties in elections, working with established trade unions, which are pilloried as being bureaucratic, dealing with demands like legal defense of minimum wage, which in itself doesn't strengthen unions per se, etc. If incremental organizing means doing all this, the perspective that says, " this is just reformism; we need a revolution" hinders getting anything done. One can say, yes, in a mythical possible future the question of a rupture could be real. But right now, you've got to put that stuff aside and start building your class organizations. In the event that rupture becomes real, it will only happen in a monumental crisis of capitalism, and if your class organizations are not around, the crisis will turn to the Right, the far Right — not to the Left — and you'll be stuck saying, "I thought there was going to be a revolution, and nobody gave it to me." So right now, what is on our agenda is all those less sexy, less fashionable activities of organizing that are considered insufficiently revolutionary by so much of the fashionista Left.

DLJ: There's been a lot of delegitimization of public institutions today. I feel like right now, in a lot of ways, there is a crisis of the state of things, or the state, and the state is having a lot of acrimony, fighting, and in-fighting. They're prosecuting a former president under the Espionage Act or at least trying to.

VC: Yeah, that delegitimization of institutions doesn't play in our favor, but rather the favor of the far Right. This is an abject lesson even though liberalism is ideologically in crisis. The Left has not had much to show for it, because it's entirely parasitic on the bourgeois parties. It depends on them, and that's a ringing vindication of the view that the Left needs to stop having its Friday night séances around the revolution and start organizing. Otherwise, you're going to be stuck with something worse than Trump for the next 20 years. **IP**

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[1] (Brooklyn: Verso, 2022).

[2] *Jacobin* 44 (Wintner 2022).

[3] C. Wright Mills, "Letter to the New Left," *New Left Review* 5 (Sept/Oct 1960): "The social and historical conditions under which industrial workers tend to become a class-for-themselves, and a decisive political force, must be fully and precisely elaborated. There have been, there are, there will be such conditions; of course these conditions vary according to national social structure and the exact phase of their economic and political development. Of course we can't 'write off the working-class.' But we must *study* all that, and freshly. Where labour exists as an agency, of course we must work with it, but we must not treat it as The Necessary Lever — as nice old Labour Gentlemen in your country and elsewhere used to do."

[4] Eric Hobsbawm, "Labour in the Great City," *New Left Review* 166 (Nov/Dec 1987): 39–51.

[5] David Duhalde, "The more things change, the more they stay the same: A response to Canel and Jacobs," *Platypus Review* 144 (March 2022), available online at <https://platypus1917.org/2022/03/02/the-more-things-change-the-more-they-stay-the-same-a-response-to-canel-and-jacobs/>.

[6] David Brooks, "A 2024 Presidential Candidate Who Meets the Moment," *New York Times*, July 14, 2022.

[7] Vivek Chibber, *The Class Matrix: Social Theory after the Cultural Turn* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022), 75.

[8] See Joan Robinson, *Economic Theory* (1962): "The misery of being exploited by capitalists is nothing compared to the misery of not being exploited at all."

[9] D. L. Jacobs, "The destiny of civilization: An interview with Michael Hudson," *Platypus Review* 151 (November 2022), available online at <https://platypus1917.org/2022/11/01/the-destiny-of-civilization-an-interview-with-michael-hudson/>.

[10] Erik Olin Wright, *How to be an Anticapitalist in the Twenty-First Century* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2019).

[11] Vivek Chibber, "How to be a Socialist in the Twenty-First Century," *Jacobin*, February 19, 2020, available online at <https://jacobin.com/2020/02/how-to-be-a-socialist-in-the-twenty-first-century>.

DLJ: At the end of "How Capitalism Endures," you bring up Eric Hobsbawm's 1987 essay[4] about how urban villages have changed and how we can't organize in the same manner anymore. Could you discuss opportunities for us to correct mistakes of past organizing that are maybe available now?

VC: Ha, I wish I had the answer to that question because I wouldn't be stuck doing Zoom interviews, I could actually do something useful in the world. We haven't yet learned beyond some basic lessons of reengaging the working class in today's setting because we, i.e., socialists, have been taking a beating for 40 years. And we're at a place right now where tactical innovations have not yet been discovered. Most of the debate, sadly, is still over strategy. I say "sadly" because to doubt the strategic importance of class organizing means that the socialist movement has lost its anchor. There shouldn't be any debate over the long-term, strategic importance of class organizing. All the debate should be on the tactics of doing it in today's world. But that debate will not happen until there's real organizing going on and concrete questions are taken up. Right now the concrete questions for the Left are about elections and electoralism because that's where the Left is active. That's not a bad thing either because any Left worth its salt in the near future is going to need a powerful electoral element to it. The days of trying to do an end run around the bourgeois state are over. But the tactical questions around organizing are still far away.

DLJ: How might such organizing disallow being captured by the Democrats?

VC: The dilemma that socialists confront now is that the position that they came to in the 80s and 90s no longer appears viable. That position was to stop having anything to do with the Democratic Party, because it's a bourgeois party and you need to organize a third party. The key question here is, what is the role of that third party? If the role of the third party is to run in elections against the two dominant parties, you're confronted with the hard reality that there have been hundreds of attempts to do this, at the local and national level, and every one of them has failed.

These attempts failed for two reasons. One is that, in any winner-take-all electoral system it's difficult for a third party to break in, because of the worry of the wasted vote on the part of the populace for the third party. In the United States it's especially difficult because of the battery of legal restrictions, which not only make it difficult to get on the ballot line, but also govern how parties can elect candidates and intervene in primaries. All of which is written in a way to make it impossible for them to function as viable electoral alternatives. The question becomes, if it's true that the Democratic Party is a graveyard for the Left, how do you run a third-party alternative if there is structural impossibility for having a third electoral party? The only way out has to be a party that straddles the Democratic Party but bases itself in class organizing, not in electoral politics. This is something the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) might be able to do if it were to become more directed in their political strategy.

DLJ: So, I want you to go more into the idea of basing oneself in the working-class community. David Duhalde of the DSA Fund mentioned in an article in the *Platypus Review*, that the "dirty little secret" is that the stronger and the more effective DSA becomes in terms of getting people elected in the Democratic Party, the more the DSA potentially weds itself to the Democratic Party.[5] What does it mean then to embed oneself in the working class?

VC: The argument that the more successful the DSA is in getting its members elected as Democrats, the more it will become wedded to the Democratic Party is, I think, 100% correct. Not only that, there will be enormous pressure to move to the center. They have to, because they are in such a small minority on municipal bodies, in state legislatures, that the only way they'll be viable is if they craft alliances with other Democrats, who will be to the Right of them. Those are the people whose help they need to get bills passed. You will have DSA saying, "this person is not a socialist, but they're a good progressive. Please vote for them. This person is not a progressive but they sometimes help us get bills passed; they're a good liberal. Please vote for them." There's no way to avoid that. And that's why the only way the participation in elections can be effective is if it doesn't transform into electoralism, i.e., where your political strategy comes to rely primarily on getting people into office instead of relying on organizing working class people in their jobs and in their neighborhoods.

So you ask, what does it mean to be embedded in the working class? I think it's blindingly simple. I think it means two things. That your activity is primarily located physically in places where you find working-class people, which is their jobs and their neighborhoods. And secondly that your recruitment is geared towards expanding that demographic inside your party rather than college students or downwardly mobile professionals. Those are all fine to have in a political party, but if they're the class factions that are deciding the party platforms, giving it direction, it's obvious that the party is going to orbit around the class perspectives and the class interests of those people, rather than working people.

DLJ: David Brooks, in a recent *New York Times* article,[6] noted that the Republican Party is looking more and more like a coalition of working class voters, multiracial people, white, black, brown, etc. Wouldn't that strategy also imply participating in Republican elections then?

VC: In the highest, most abstract level, potentially. But you have to look at what the driving forces of Republican elections and candidacy are, and those are difficult to reconstitute in a Left-wing, working-class fashion. This notion that the Republican Party is becoming more of a working-class party is a gross exaggeration. It's true that working-class votes for the Democrats are shrinking, but most of them are not going over to the Republicans: they're becoming independents. The working-class base of the Republican Party remains the same. It's also maintained that the Latino and black working class is moving towards the Republican Party, but that means you're going from 90% support for Democrats to 82% support for Democrats. The numbers are still skewed heavily away from the Republicans. Finally, in a capitalist economy the bulk of the votes are always going to be working class because of the numbers. That workers are voting for the Republican Party doesn't translate into a possibility that the Republicans will turn into a working class party. It's hard enough to get the Democrats to take workers seriously. Trying to right the ship of the Republican Party in this juncture is a pipe dream.

DLJ: That also goes for the Democratic Party; they tend to have the legitimacy of being where organized labor at least orbits around. You mentioned that most of the working class is becoming independent now. It would seem like they are pointing towards breaking from Democrats and Republicans.

VC: The fact that workers don't declare fidelity to one of the two parties is a far cry from saying that they'll vote for a third party. The only way that becomes a viable strategy is if the third party breaks into the system with a huge splash so that it's seen as a viable contender. Having a small third party and saying we have this huge potential base for us out there, like I said, it's been tried hundreds of times. I used to also believe in this in the 90s, but you see what happens when an independent like Ralph Nader runs: they're just decimated. If the Left has any rationality whatsoever, it'll give up this dream of an electoral alternative to these two parties until that alternative has built up a gargantuan mass base before it enters the electoral arena. These tiny third parties that start up with one or two unions and a few thousand votes will remain exactly where they are.

DLJ: I agree. I've also lived through Green Party runs. I bring that up because the electoral cycle still has a hold over how people think about politics. This was always a question about the base, and this is why you have base-building versus electoral strategies. But certainly a party would still participate in electoral activities. When we think of the classical Marxist parties, the Second International ones that you're very familiar with, they took seats, but as you said earlier, they weren't electoralists, and that wasn't their strategy; their strategy was to take power.

VC: These parties a century ago had an almost exclusive hold over working-class voters. Look at the history of labor parties, socialist parties from 1910 to 1960. The bulk of their voting population was not just working class, but a blue-collar working class. They maintained that base by virtue of the fact that they weren't just electoral parties. They either were offshoots and creations of trade unions, or they were parties that created trade unions, which became their conduit to the class. The parties were able to mobilize the class in a way that is just not possible for the Left today. The other issue to remember is that, other than England, the majority of these European countries did not have winner-take-all electoral systems. Rather there was some version of a more open political system, either electoral system, proportional representation, or some combination of proportional representation and winner-take-all. This meant that it was easier to maintain the integrity of your political program without having to try to win over large sections of the middle class.

We are now encumbered with constraints on every side, we have the worst possible electoral system, the most draconian laws about how to run a party in that system, zero connection to the working class, and I could go on and on about the media and the state, etc. So, right now, if you just try to enter elections without anything else, you'll be hammered. That's why the best combination is to use elections to build the class base, rather than thinking the elections are a way of getting progressive legislation. Without real pressure coming from the labor movement, you won't have power if you get into office.

DLJ: You write that "classical Marxists erred not in their fidelity to a structural class theory but in their failure to fully theorize its implications."[7] How do you find stability immanent in class structure itself? Does that mean that class is dependence? In a sense, dependence is a foundation of society.

VC: The essence of the bourgeois class structure is an asymmetrical interdependence. Capitalists depend on workers and workers depend on capitalists, but any individual worker depends on his employer far more than the employer depends on the worker. That means that the worker will seek out the capitalist rather than to try to remove him. Only under certain extreme conditions do the workers find it reasonable or rational to try to displace that relation altogether. That's basically it, the secret to capitalism is that workers think it's better to be exploited than to not be exploited.

DLJ: The Joan Robinson quote, yes, exactly.[8] This also raises the question of unions: they intensify this problem because, on the one hand, they allow people more precarity but they do so by, to quote Rosa Luxemburg, "forming a cartel against the unemployed." I.e., they have to prevent themselves from being replaced — "scabbed" is the more pithy language. It points towards the necessity of a party to allow for this third thing that you bring up, which is the culture of solidarity to overcome the individual's interests in not organizing or doing collective action, right? How did these things come together? Because I always kind of took Marxism historically. You mentioned the unions earlier with the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). On the one hand, there are unions before the SPD. On the other hand, the very existence of the SPD is encouraging people to join the unions because maybe the head is an SPD member. How do you see that relationship playing out because even having the unions there—

VC: I think you're absolutely right. Unions are not a socialist institution. They are a bourgeois situation. They are the instruments with which workers defend themselves against both the power of the employer and the vagaries of the market, which means that unions will often find it eminently rational to exclude other workers to become what neoclassical economics called the monopolistic institutions, which are bent on preserving the market power of their members because the members are trying to sell their assets, i.e., their labor power, at the highest price they can.

The way out of that is exactly as you said: you need to have an ideologically provided perspective, which sees that the short-term gains for the members come at a certain price, which is a long-term persistent weakness. The more ambitious goals of socialists within the labor market are always also the more difficult ones to achieve. The cost gradient of those goals is steep. You have to persuade your members that they need to take on additional risks, additional costs of this strategy. There are lots of things that entail additional risks, which are just stupid, and that's what we call ultra-Leftism. It is calling for suicide missions, ridiculous demands. You have to make a judgment. Is the goal reasonable and achievable? Or is it a pipe dream that comes out of my own particular fantasies about what it means to be a revolutionary, to be a socialist?

So for the party or more class-conscious trade unionists, who were trying to go beyond what Lenin called a "trade-union consciousness," there are two additional tasks. You have to persuade your members to undertake risks with a real commitment; it can't be just through exhortation. They have to embrace it because with that, there will be a commitment to it. On top of that, the goal must be achievable. The worst thing that can happen is that because of the respect and authority that you command, you induce members to take up a campaign that never ought to have been taken up anyway, and when you lose, you also lose your legitimacy. It starts a cycle of demoralization and dejection on the part of the base. That's when the organization starts to fall apart. This is where politics becomes more of an art and less of a science, because there's no algorithm to distinguish one from the other. This is why you need to have constant ideological training with a seriousness that is the exact opposite of ultra-Leftism.

DLJ: This leads me to a question I wasn't expecting to ask: are you aware of the anti-Left Marxism being talked about now? I bring that up because it's something I've noticed among people in gen Z. They've reacted to the DSA, because they've seen the DSA as leading people into the Democratic Party, right? They would point to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as an example. This still shows the problem with tying political ideology to the Democrats or Republicans. Still, in practice, people say, maybe this person in the Democratic Party is a socialist. "MAGA Communism" is another thing, but doesn't that still raise the need for something ideologically to break up the Democrats and Republicans? That's why I push back against saying "two-party system": it ends up legitimizing that as a horizon of politics. I.e., from a socialist perspective the Democrats and Republicans are not really parties; they just administer things.

VC: Yeah.

DLJ: Rosa Luxemburg's point was you need historical knowledge of the final goal in order to actually prompt people to potentially do things that are not immediately in their interest and might be very costly — but historically, this goal has played a role in organizing millions of people, right?

VC: One slight correction to what you said: whatever you're asking people to do must also be immediately in their interest. Otherwise, they won't take it, they won't do it. E.g., when you go out on a strike, you're not saying the strike is not immediately in your interest. It is. The longer-term perspective is something else, but whenever you're trying to organize somebody to undertake a job action, you're never going to want to say to them, "look this really isn't something you should do."

DLJ: It feels like one is trying to realize Marxism, and, therefore, telling people they should go on strikes and start salting. They're getting jobs so that they can become union activists, because they have the collected works of Lenin and think, "this is the thing to do." I bring that up because in the classical Marxist period that you've mentioned in a few of your texts, they didn't have to tell people to go on strike. They just did. The resistance was there. You mentioned that conditions have changed a lot and I'm not trying to get you to summarize your book, but I was wondering if you could point to some of the most pertinent changes, besides just industrialization.

VC: Let me combine your comment about the two parties and the dangers of identifying yourself politically against them, with the question of what conditions are different today. What's different today is that we're trying to reignite a socialist movement in a context where a democratic bourgeois state is not only available but fully stable. Whereas the earlier wave of socialist organizing began in a context when workers were not just an exploited class, but an oppressed status group with fewer rights, freedoms, privileges; where they didn't have basic amenities, living in ghettos. It was easy for them to forge a political identity, because every component of their social existence reinforced the gap between them and their employer, their exploiters. Today, the identities are much more fragmented. The reason they're fragmented is that workers now have previously unavailable avenues to them for redress.

The sign that today's Left is becoming mature will be when it grapples with this, understands it, and sees that this is why a mythical revolutionary overthrow of the state is just not on the cards. It's not just all the repressive powers that the state has. This notion that the state must be overthrown to achieve justice — it's something that you only see in the tiniest student circles, not in the broader culture. We have to organize in this context and because of that, it is essential to know how to relate to the political parties and the electoral system. For the vast majority of the population, that is what politics is. They come out every few years to pull a lever, and that's their participation in the system. To tell them that they shouldn't even do that — that's not real politics without having an alternative through which they can influence the world — it's just lunacy, and that's why the Left will remain marginal as long as it keeps doing that. That's a primary difference between today and the early 20th century.

You're also absolutely right that in the U.S. today, to seek insertion into Left politics through this party system, is also a dead end. It's not going to work. The relevant distinction here is whether your strategic perspective is oriented toward these parties or whether you're willing to use those parties for yourself. The strategic perspective has to be what it was in 1920: you organize the class. But, given where the U.S. Left is, you have zero entree into that class. Zero. One way to get your views heard is through the ritual of elections every four years, because that's when people listen. If you can do that, you can use it as a bridgehead for class organizing. Without the class organizing it'll just be another imaginative road to a dead end. If you can use it tactically through every election cycle, you also build your class organizations, and hopefully soon enough you get to the point where the class organizations have an independence and where you can use them to start influencing the electoral cycle. That's the only iterative process that is open. Salting is a legitimate and necessary part of this process. The difficulty is that salting is being done in dribs and drabs: one person here, one person there, and they get swallowed up by the workplace. It needs to be done so that the people who are salting have real support and resources available to them, the way the Communist Party was doing it in the 20s and 30s. Maybe we'll get there, I hope we do, but I wouldn't want to take a stance against salting.

DLJ: Certainly people should get jobs when they have the opportunities and need them. I don't want to prevent people from doing that.

One of the issues that comes up in the electoral cycle is that the Left projects itself onto the Republicans and Democrats: the Left will declare what is a labor issue and what is an issue of capital, taking it from the wings of neoliberalism. I.e., tax cuts are supposed to be a capital issue, and the minimum wage is supposed to be a labor issue. This goes back to my question about the capitalist state. The issue I tend to have with that is that Marx calls wages "variable capital": they are capital and all of the labor forms are capital. The Left projects wage labor into a lowered horizon of what "labor" and "capital" meant historically, excluding state power, into economic redistribution.

VC: For the sake of this conversation, we can take it for granted that no viable Left ought to be viewing the Democratic Party in that way. What we're talking about is this: if we grant that the Democratic Party is another corporate party, is there a way of getting traction out of work with them or is there not? That's all. With regard to the minimum wage, I think to see the issue as one of abolishing the wage rather than affecting its level would be a mistake, because you're going into a fantasy land right now.

DLJ: No, I'm not. I wouldn't be putting it at the level of minimum wage versus abolition of wages. This would go back to the ultra-Leftism you mentioned earlier, but rather a question of who organizes the wage. I.e., there's a difference between a wage increase from unions versus legislation.

VC: But here's the difficulty, and this is something you have to look at soberly. What is the precedent for collective bargaining in units like small cafes, fast food restaurants, etc., across the economy? I am not aware of any time where you've had shop-by-shop collective bargaining at that level, because it's impossible. We have 100 years of organizing in the Third World to draw on. This is the informal labor market. Workers in the U.S. in these sectors look a lot like workers in Brazil or India — you'll never organize them to the point of having collective bargaining in those tiny establishments across the country. Now, you might have something like what California is trying to do, which France does in a different but related way. You have a certain threshold of organization in the coffee or the fast food sector, and then there are laws which extend those agreements to the rest of the sector even if they're not in the unions. Or you have boards like they're trying to establish in which

"Confronting capitalism" continues on page 4